“If you are having unprotected sex in 2020 and you don’t know your HIV status or the status of your intimate partner, you are rolling the dice.” Warning words from Simiso Msomi, a young HIV positive activist, who believes that if South Africa is to turn the corner on persistently rising HIV infections, we need a drastic shift in attitudes and sexual behaviour, especially in young people.

Diagnosed as HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) positive at 21, Simiso is a far cry from the scared and depressed young man he became after his diagnosis nine years ago. He now embodies the persona of a happy, healthy, and vibrant individual. As a father of two, Simiso is looking forward to turning 30 and starting ‘Chapter 2’ of his life journey. “I know that HIV will always be there, but you must allow yourself to learn and grow from this disease and then you can apply these lessons to your daily life.”

His story is a familiar one. “I had no idea that my lifestyle would lead me to becoming HIV positive. Exhibiting symptoms of what I thought was tuberculosis (TB), I was persuaded by my father to test for TB and when I arrived, the nurse who looked like a kind aunty, asked if I wanted to test for HIV at the same time. I agreed, as being HIV positive was not even a consideration at the time. I cannot describe to you how shocked I was, when she matter-of-factly told me that I tested HIV positive. My world stopped turning that day. And I spiraled into a dark, deep depression.” Angry and in denial, Simiso, like so many others, tore into himself overwhelmed by fear, agitation, anxiety and uncertainty about his health and his future. He shared his news with his girlfriend at the time, who was initially very supportive and comforting.

However, that changed when she tested HIV negative, worrying that her continued intimate relationship with him might result in her too becoming HIV positive. She was eventually persuaded by friends to end the relationship. “The breakup really affected me. I was so depressed and worried that I would never again have a normal loving and intimate relationship, let alone become a father and this would affect many of my relationships going forward.”

HIV INFLUENCERS, CHANGING PERSPECTIVES AND LIVES

Pushed by his best friend to attend a motivational session on living your best life while HIV positive, was the turning point he needed. In awe, Simiso saw an HIV positive man who had been living with the disease for 20 years and seemed to have it all; exuding confidence, health and success. “That day I can honestly say that my perspective changed. I learnt the difference between self-pity and self-worth and the importance of self-care and what it means to take control of your future. Medication is only half of it, you need to build a strong healthy body and mind, and that means exercising, eating a healthy diet and yes, pulling back from the party lifestyle that many young people enjoy.” ARVs and alcohol don’t mix well and will in fact leave one feeling quite ill and believing that that the medication does not work. This is one of the leading reasons why so many young people stop taking their ARVs. And is a contributing factor to why, despite many years of HIV activism, funding and campaigning, Southern Africa and South Africa in particular still see record numbers of new HIV infections. The HIV curve is not flattening.
GENDER ROLE NARRATIVES AND TOXIC MASCULINITY

In addition to behaviour and lifestyle choices, Simiso believes that society’s gender narratives that dictate how men should behave, has created an environment of toxic masculinity, further exacerbating fear and stigma. “As men we are told to ‘man up’ and that ‘boys don’t cry’. Men are pressurised into believing that they cannot be seen as vulnerable or weak, when in actual fact it takes real strength to admit you need help. I have found that crying helps you to deal with your pain and accept your current situation and the pain it brings.” But, he says, you need to know yourself, know your strengths and what you are capable of or you will end up doing things that you are not comfortable with. Simiso acknowledges that that this comes with growing up and maturing, but most of all being true to yourself. Acceptance of those living with HIV will help to de-stigmatise and normalise HIV in our society.

TAKING LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

The Covid-19 pandemic response has been an eye opener for Simiso. He is inspired by what he sees as a ‘highly effective response’ to the Covid-19 health crises. He believes that those in the HIV community should be taking notes. Extensive information campaigns across multiple accessible platforms, open conversations, the massive testing and buy-in from young and old on the critical importance of wearing a mask and personal hygiene has shown us that personal responsibility and behaviour modification is achievable. “It’s only been four months. Imagine if you could get this responsiveness to HIV. Where testing and knowing your status was normalised, condoms and contraceptives were easily accessible and no one stopped their medication for any reason. Covid-19 has shown us what is possible when you put your mind to it. Where there is a will, there is a way and we can stop the spread of HIV!”

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

Simiso is motivated in his desire to see his two children grow up in a society where all citizens are valued and where living with HIV is not stigmatised. “I would be a hypocrite if I was not actively helping to bring about this change. That is why I try to use my story and experiences to push against harmful stereotypes and shift attitudes about HIV. I want to show people that you can be a caring father, a professional, a son, a brother and a friend and that you are not defined by your status, but by your actions.”

He believes that being open about his status and sharing his journey, speedbumps and all, makes it easier for others to reach out to him for advice and support. “I hope that my story can make someone’s journey easier. When people see that you are loving life, have a sense of purpose and value, they feel uplifted and inspired to take the steps they need to ensure that they are living their best life.”
Simiso was recently asked to join the #COVERED24_7 campaign launched by SANAC (South African National Aids Council) as one of the HIV positive influencers who offer advice and share their stories. The aim is to inspire young people through posts about their daily routines, relationships, parenting, diet, exercise and how to live a positive life as someone who just happens to be HIV positive as well.

Follow Simiso on:

- Facebook: Smiso N Msomi
- Twitter: @smiso_shane or
- Instagram: @smiso_shane

#FRIDAYYOUTHACTIVIST  #COVERED24_7  #SAT4YOUTH

Know Your Status, contact the AIDS Helpline 24-hour hotline on 0800 012 322 for more information on HIV testing, treatment, care and prevention.